

Experience is the best teacher and we here at *Informed Voice* have a lot of lessons to learn about becoming sustainable. We will be sharing our experiences with you as we take a journey that will lead us to...

Greening up the office

by Dianne Trussell



GLOBAL WARMING. Is it real? Are we really causing it? If so, how? Amidst flavour-of-the-month debates about global warming, many people seem to have lost sight of a very simple fact: we have been unkind to the planet and ourselves for far too long. It doesn't matter how right or wrong the climate change debaters are. The essential thing is to get on with the healing we've been talking about for the 30-odd years since the start of the environmental revolution: stopping waste and pollution, restoring healthy farming practices, using renewable energy, and looking after the air, water, forests, wildlife and all life.

At the top of the list is restoring the inner environment of every human being to their natural state of peace and love, as this automatically leads to a gentler, more respectful treatment of all life. If it takes a big scare about climate change to wake everyone up, perhaps it was just the stimulus we needed. It certainly focused

our energies here at *Informed Voice* and propelled us into action on greening up our own business. Also, being natural health educators, we are acutely aware of the need to make our working environment healthier since we spend most of our work time indoors. There are no excuses now; the explosion of new information, products and services has made it much easier for everyone to do their bit for the environment and our health and if we get behind it en masse, that green revolution we started in the sixties can blossom here and now.

So our little team has embarked on the road to a healthy, eco-friendly, carbon-neutral office for the magazine and the AVN. We'd like to share our journey with you, including the bumps and challenges along the way. Will you wait for the 'perfect system' before you begin, or just roll up your sleeves and start somewhere as we are doing?

What we did first

We decided that we needed to do something. A simple but essential starting point! It turned out that every staff member was thinking about the problem and had begun to do some things themselves, but we had never discussed it as a group. Discussing it over a staff lunch really got things going. We decided to write up our journey and do an article on green office audits, to clarify our own process and help other small businesses begin theirs.

What we did second

I wrote up a simple questionnaire and emailed it to everyone on our team. Meanwhile, we started asking around about green printers and eco-friendly packaging for the magazine, and energy-saving lighting. Meryl had already switched to 100% renewable energy. Many of our wonderful clients make or supply eco-friendly products and services

and we have been increasingly buying from them, on an individual basis rather than as a consistent buying policy. You can see that there is no carefully orchestrated step-by-step schedule; rather our journey is rambling and organic, and that's OK.

What we did then

We had a follow-up meeting to go over the questionnaire results and discuss what our top priorities should be and how to tackle them. We began to gather some baseline data to get an overview of our current consumption and waste. We are a non-profit organization and the funds just aren't there for hiring consultants to do audits and programs for us, so at this stage we are inventing our way forwards as we go while looking for the best bargains. One of the exciting things for a small business is that tidying up our act and doing the right thing by the environment can actually save money, or at least divert it from inefficiency and waste into better practices and outcomes.

Our progress so far

Our average self-rated eco-friendliness score was 3/10!

The major topics that we wanted to address as a priority are:

- paper, recycling;
- energy use, renewable energy;
- waste segregation, recycling;
- inks, cartridges (toxicity and waste);
- plastic packaging;
- air, light, dust, rays;
- clutter, ergonomics, planning.

Solutions fell into several categories:

- could be done by everyone immediately at no cost;
- require group discussion, decision making, planning and policy;
- require co-operation with other people using the same facilities;
- require equipment or infrastructure therefore needing funds – a limited commodity;
- require considerable time – also a limited commodity.

Something unexpected emerged from the discussion. Several core issues were log-jamming our operation and having flow-on effects which have an impact not only on effectiveness at going green, but other aspects as well. Work overload and funding insufficiency were at the top of the list and contribute significantly to our shortage of space, inefficient computing systems and lack of reliable help. These in turn were affecting our re-structuring, ergonomics, purchasing, recycling, staff motivation, productivity and even energy use. It became apparent that anyone doing a green office audit would do well to troubleshoot below the surface too!

At the meeting we agreed on some first steps for immediate action. We began working on the log-jams and made tangible progress within a couple of days. We all agreed to do some homework in the form of reading the results of our questionnaire, meeting and list of the actions that could be taken right away by everyone at no cost, plus the documents we had been generously given on how to audit and green our office.

At the time of writing we have started:

- segregating waste bins and, recycling;
- recycling all printer cartridges.;
- no longer purchasing notepads, choosing to make our own out of re-usable paper;
- buying post-consumer waste recycled paper;
- choosing on-screen editing and email instead of printing and paper messages;
- using double-sided or re-used sheets where printing is required;
- backing up files to flash drives instead of burning to plastic discs;
- buying 100% renewable energy;
- turning off lights; turning off computers and monitors instead of leaving them on standby;
- an energy audit and
- reviewing and restructuring our phone and internet services (e.g. using Skype) to save money on phone calls. these funds that can then be diverted to other changes.

What we are committed to doing

- Buying biodegradable starch biros;
- Changing paper consumables to recycled content or finding non-paper options such as re-useable stamps rather than printed labels;
- Switching to the lowest energy-use light bulbs;
- Creating downloadable back-issues of the magazine which can be an alternative to CDs that we have to burn, package and post;
- Dropping one line of business to not only free up some of the editor's time, but also to free up a small room into which a lot of books and equipment can be moved. This will liberate some space in the main office and make it easier to clean and organize. It will also improve ventilation and air quality of the room where most of the staff work.
- Purchasing indoor plants to assist with air quality;
- Sourcing green printing (ink and paper), packaging and distribution for the magazine.

From time to time we'll update you on our progress...watch this space! And watch our website – we plan to upload the audit forms, etc. for you to download and use. ■

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